

GENERAL BECK'S RETIREMENT AND ANTI-HITLER PLOT OF SEPTEMBER 1938 Maxime Mourin, 1948

The new command organization in fact left all military power to Hitler and the Party leaders. The Wehrmacht became the National Socialist Army. The SS now formed ever larger and more numerous units, not only reserved for the guard of prisons and camps, but able to have a military role and possibly protect the Fuhrer against his own generals. The triumphal success of Anschluss had moreover led to the adhesion to the doctrines and modes of action of the Fuhrer of many members of the General Staff until the reluctant.

General Beck, Chief of the General Staff, did not allow this wave of unqualified approval to be carried away. That the army lost more and more powers as the armaments policy grew, as we approached war, it seemed contrary to all precedents and a paradox all the more dangerous that real power was in the hands of people who liked to play with fire.

At the end of March, Beck prepared a memorandum to show the dangers of a policy which could lead to the formation of a new coalition against Germany, a policy which could not fail to unleash an untimely war whose outcome could be a more definitive defeat than that of 1918. He asked that this memorandum be transmitted to the Fuhrer. But he got no answer. However, the international situation was worsening. At the time of the crisis caused in May by the municipal elections of Czechoslovakia, Sir Neville Henderson, Ambassador of England, visited the Fuhrer three times in twenty-four hours. France and England specified their weapons programs. Their diplomacy was active.

At the beginning of June Hitler took advantage of maneuvers in the Suterburg field to meet the generals. After the few sentences devoted to the rehabilitation of von Fritsch, he announced that he proposed to attack Czechoslovakia shortly. Beck was not unaware that the Fuhrer harbored such projects. The General Staff had studied this eventuality, but did not believe the imminent execution. Like all generals, Beck felt that the army would not be fit for war until 1943 or 1945. He continued to hope that the German people would wake up and get the better of Nazism before it was too late.

Immediately after the Fuhrer's statement, Beck tried to talk to Brauchitsch. But he escaped, then went on leave and Beck had to wait in particular for Hitler to decide to go to war without consulting the General Staff. He had been informed of a memoir dictated in April to Keitel for the Fuhrer, in which the latter claimed for himself alone the direction of the total war. Hitler had also addressed at that time reproaches to Brauchitsch and Beck for the slowness with which the plan of attack on Czechoslovakia was prepared. On June 18, he gave new instructions which provided, among other things, that the attack would not take place if the non-intervention of

France and England was not assured.

Little confluence, however, in the stability of the Fuhrer's spirit and fearing the outbreak of an attack under bad political conditions, Beck asked Brauchitsch to send directly to the Fuhrer the memorandum he had previously drawn up, which he had completed and communicated to all the generals having an important command, and which they had approved. He insisted on the fact that in his eyes, a war at the present time, even a lightning war, entailed risks of economic catastrophe for Germany and for all of Europe. Brauchitsch reluctantly transmitted this memory to Hitler. This one was unworthy. He ordered Beck to withdraw his memorandum, Beck refused.

However the events were evolving in the direction imposed by the Fuhrer. The Sudetes affair developed and became more and more serious every day. Hitler's concern to find a pretext for aggression was obvious. Beck obtained to be received by the Fuhrer. The interview was quite stormy. Hitler did not deny that war could come, but he formally denied that he himself wanted it. He could not tolerate millions of Germans being bullied by the Czechs. Beck then asked for assurances that nothing would be attempted to provoke a conflict, that no war would be unleashed without the General Staff having given its opinion. Hitler called him back to his role as an executing agent and begged him to obey without arguing. Beck replied that he could not take responsibility for giving orders which he disapproved of. He sent a letter of resignation.

This resignation embarrassed Hitler. He didn't like resignations, real ones. He wanted to keep the initiative for the charge. In particular, Beck's resignation may have occurred. After the departures of Von Blomberg and Von Fritsch, themselves presented as resignations, that of the Chief of Staff would have had a deplorable effect, when the Reich embarked on a policy of prestige and played of the threat of his army. Hitler asked Brauchitsch to intervene with Beck to have him resign. Beck was knowingly protesting. He intended to defend the right of the General Staff to be consulted on the question of the outbreak of hostilities, to put an end to the cascade of successive abdications of the generals. He counted that his attitude would strike the spirits, that other withdrawals would take place. But for his resignation to be effective, the officers' state of mind would have had to be not what it was, but what it wanted it to be. However, most of the officers were unaware of the real causes of the departures of Von Blomberg and Von Fritsch and the Gestapo involvement.

Speaking to each other only on an equal footing, suspicious in their conversations, they could only hear the noise of scandals from above, and such occasions were rare. On the other hand, this resignation had to be spectacular. However, Hitler kept it secret and Beck did not insist that it be made public immediately. He was paralyzed, like many other German officers, by the oath of loyalty to the Fuhrer, of "loyalty until death" which he had taken on the night of August 2, 1934, after Hindenburg's death. But hadn't the generals already taken an oath to the Republic? Arguing international tension, Hitler took advantage of this to give Beck a de facto successor, but he did not

make the news official until October 1938, after the Sudeten affair had been settled. He will not fail to repeat this process during the following years, as well as regards certain changes of assignment as certain resignations, certain dismissals and even certain deaths. However, the news of Beck's departure filtered through censorship and a French journalist announced it at the beginning of September, revealing the motives.

Groups of "opponents" were not unanimous in approving Beck's decision. Because if all opponents of the regime holding high jobs resign, the place would be clear for the Nazis. This resignation appeared in contradiction with the policy recommended until then which consisted in bringing in the groups of "opponents" the folds the greatest possible number of people in high places. Beck had, however, tried to get Schacht to resign as well. He had had several secret interviews with him, led by Oster and Gisevius. Oster was also in favor of keeping Schacht in his post, while Gisevius felt that he should also resign, his functions having lost all importance since Goering had taken over the German economy. But Schacht was personally willing to cling to whatever power he was given. While serving the Nazi regime, he expected its overthrow, if it were to be for his benefit.

It was in this sense that he maintained contact with Hitler's bourgeois ministers and in particular with Schwerin Von Krosigk, Minister of Finance. The latter allowed himself a certain outspokenness. On September 1, 1938, in the midst of the Sudeten crisis, he sent Hitler a long report to inform him of the danger of his policy. "My Fuhrer," he said, "I consider it my imperative duty to express to you my deep anxiety about the future of Germany. It depends on England whether or not a war with Czechoslovakia is localized. All the experience that I have acquired over many years of England not being militarily ready for war will not prevent it from entering it, because it has two main assets: one is participation considered. as the next of the United States, the other is the signs of weakness that Germany gives economically and financially. It is, in my opinion, a utopia to believe that we will procure the raw materials necessary to sustain a war by means of imports from South-East Europe and by the intensive exploitation of our own soil. The Western powers will not throw themselves against the Westwall; they will let the German economy weaken, so that after the initial successes we will gradually lose our military advantages in front of the supplies of armaments and planes of the United States".

To succeed General Beck, he appointed General Halder. He was not unaware that this general, whose value as a theoretician was unanimously recognized, did not possess a rare firmness of character, and he expected his total docility. He was not a warrior, but an office general, a military writer who did mathematics and botany in his spare time. While he had offered a visible hold to National Socialist propaganda, he was also not insensitive to the influence that opponents of the regime had tried to exert over him. He had already met Oster and Goerdeler in particular, and the latter especially impressed him. Halder also knew Beck and the latter, always optimistic in his appreciation of the "opposition forces", had replied to those who criticized him

for his resignation that he knew his successor had the same feelings as him.

But in fact Halder was far from having as strong opinions and a temperament as his predecessor had hoped. Less concerned with his civic responsibilities than with the good condition of his outfit (he did not cross his legs without protecting the red band of his pants with a white handkerchief) (1), he will be the type of the early bird and the hesitant general. Judging Goerdeler already too compromised, too watchful, he avoided meeting him for several months. His cautious contacts with the dissatisfied were limited to the search for information. He wanted to play the right card. He asked Canaris to tell him whether the plans Hitler was making for Czechoslovakia were a bluff or a real preparation for war. The admiral, who was aware of the wavering nature of Halder's opinions, contented himself with telling him that the Abwehr was not providing political information.

Halder then turned to Oster, on Beck's advice. Oster did not have complete confidence either, and when the question of a possible coup was raised, he advised the Chief of the General Staff to see politicians and not the military. Halder spoke to Schacht, the only one he felt was up to his new post. He asked him bluntly if he would agree to enter the government which would yield to Hitler if the policy of warlike adventures of this one made necessary its elimination. As usual, Schacht replied with as much precision as he was quick in his words. Halder said that he could only participate in the anti-Hitler movement if it had a sufficient moral and legal basis. He demanded that he be presented with well-rounded files on Nazi crimes, on concentration camps, as if the Gestapo were accustomed to making their exploits public. He also and above all wanted to obtain the approval and collaboration of his superior von Brauchitsch. But he remained on as cautious reserve as in previous months.

It was an intervention by the Fuhrer that reduced these hesitations. On August 10, 1938, Hitler met at the Berghof, in Berchtesgaden, the principal generals, heads of staff, commanders of the army corps, commanders of air groups, and a certain number of senior officers who had his confidence, like Colonels Jodl and Jeschonnek. He explained to them the reasons which determined him to intervene in Czechoslovakia. Some generals, including General Wietersheim, raised some objections of a technical nature, in particular about the Czechoslovak "Maginot line" and the non-completion of the German line of western fortifications. On the objection that it could not withstand a Franco-British offensive for more than three weeks, the Fuhrer replied that it would hold out for three years if necessary. The character of infallibility, of military superiority which emerged from Hitler's words somewhat upset the generals, whose fears were henceforth more precise about the course of the conflict. Halder and Brauchitsch then took another step towards non-conformism.

They were not the only ones to be sensitive to this threat. The population no longer listened to the fanfares of the parades with the same elation. It was a confused feeling, but the development of which was visible. He could only encourage the

attitude of the reluctant Germans. But if they were in agreement in considering that it was necessary to get rid of Hitler before he provoked an untimely war, the establishment of a concrete plan of coup d'etat was already giving rise to multiple disagreements among them. The choice of the best moment to attempt the operation was the object as soon as possible, others were always ready to slow down, convinced that it is important to avoid a hasty operation, ill-prepared, and the failure of which would have reinforced the situation. Fuhrer's position. But was it necessary to create the favorable situation or to wait for it to present itself? But wait for what? An internal event was increasingly unlikely due to police surveillance and mass apathy. It was therefore necessary that it was an external event that created this new situation. Hitler could well have provoked a conflict in which democracies would not hesitate to go to war.

But if we waited until operations were triggered, it might be difficult to stop them. The Fuhrer could have the entire German people behind him, animated by a feeling of national unity exacerbated by the state of war and the propaganda of Goebbels. On the other hand, the democracies could launch a land and air offensive not excluded, which did not smile at the opponents of Nazism. Finally, the memory of the legend of the "stab in the back" gave rise to scruples in them, which were added to those whose origin went back to the oath of loyalty to the Fuhrer given to officers and officials. It was necessary that the opportunity to be used was such that it disbanded the army of its oath. A pressing threat of war might constitute a favorable circumstance. But for it to exist, democracies had to be firm. It would therefore be useful to warn their leaders that a German opposition was waiting to take action when a threat of war took shape. A communication was made to London in this direction. However, some of the "oppsants" remained in Paris without waiting for war to be declared, for they remained convinced that Hitler was bluffing, that the German people, convinced that the Fuhrer would always know how to avoid the war, would not be ready to support an insurrection until then. that he would have the disappointment of actually being placed in front of a hostile outbreak.

The timing was not the only topic of discussion. Brauchitsch, Halder and a few others remained in favor of bringing Goering into the conspiracy, of having him play against Hitler and Himmler. Others, on the other hand, were resolutely opposed to the introduction into their ranks of a man so deeply compromised in the Blomberg and Fritsch cases and who could not be expected with certainty to renounce National Socialism and its leader.

And how?, moreover, is it safe to contact Goering?

The fate of Hitler himself was the subject of controversy. Some wanted to kill him to avoid any restart; others wanted him to appear in court first; still others were planning to pass him off as crazy. The generals who could have contact with him or who could send accomplice officers to him would have been able to ascertain his person, dead or alive. But they were reluctant to this solution which did not fit well with their oath of fidelity. A less obvious perjury was needed. Halder always came back to the

uncompromising solution of the anonymous explosive, which made it possible, for example, to blow up the Fuhrer's train in the middle of the countryside, to attribute the intervention to the enemies of the Reich.

Despite these disagreements and discussions, the idea of a coup d'etat with the help of important figures was beginning to be accepted. Preparations were to include the search for other accomplices. Oster allowed himself to visit his former direct superior, General Von Witzleben, in his clinic in Dresden. He told the general, who still ignored them, the details of the Blomberg and Fritsch affairs. He also informed him of Hitler's intentions relating to a very imminent attack on Czechoslovakia. Von Witzleben declared himself ready to put all his means at the disposal of the coup. He was put in touch with Doctor Schacht. Like most generals, Witzleben had confidence in the latter's political sense. He accepted an interview without difficulty. He was accompanied by his subordinates whose feelings he knew, General Count Brockdorff, commander of Potsdam's division.

Agreement between the three men was quickly established. The conspirators were able to define their plan of action. General Brockdorff would take care of military matters in detail, Gisevius police matters, Nebe, Oster, each in their departments, would gather as much information as possible on the reaction possibilities of the adversary. Schacht would take charge of purely political side, but his decisions would be taken only when Hitler was eliminated, in order to avoid prior competitions, source of discord. A proclamation to the German people would be prepared. It would affirm the will of the insurgents to defend freedom of conscience, law and peace.

It would be revealed to the German people that the alleged exploits of Hitler during the First World War had no other evidence than the words of a sergeant who was subsequently discarded because he was making comments in bars. little in accordance with Hitler's legend. Halder and Brauchitsch were to provide for the proper means to communicate their orders to the most important provincial generals, to warn some of them of the eventuality of a putsch, to prevent the dissemination of countermeasures. Von Witzleben would have control over operations in the Berlin area. He counted on the collaboration of General Hoppner, commander of an armored division near the capital.

Moreover, he did not exclude the possibility of having Brauchitsch and Halder locked up for a few days, if they refused to march in extremis. In any case, a short period of military dictatorship was necessary after the coup d'état, before being able to hand over the government of the Reich to civilians and more particularly to Doctor Schacht, Halder had suggested that a civilian directly took the head of the new minister, and he had put forward the names of Von Neurath, of Gessler, of Noske. But the first was considered too compromised. The other two, former war ministers of the Republic, too tied to an outdated era and too destined to awaken the hostility of the left parties and the working masses, were also considered unacceptable.

In spite of everything, it was only the outline of a plan, the success of which presupposed that nothing remained in the indecision and that everything was carefully prepared. But events were moving faster than the conspirators would have liked. On September 9, at Nuremberg, the Fuhrer held a new council of war, attended by Brauchitsch, Halder, Keitel. It was a question of final setting the plan of attack of Czechoslovakia. Hitler did not foresee any special measures in the west. He was convinced that France would not budge. But the General Staff did not share, convinced Halder that the catastrophe was approaching. He told Brauchitsch about it, but failed to drag him further down the dangerous path of the plot. He decided, however, to set aside his previous reservations and it was in his own apartment that, on September 15, when the Nuremberg Congress had just ended, a number of conspirators met for the establishment of a definitive plan for action. There were in particular General Beck, Admiral Canaris, General Von Witzleben, General Hoppner, Lieutenant-Colonel Boehm-Tattelbach and a few others.

History has shown that a putsch only succeeds in exactly the right time. The auspicious opportunity must be taken at its exact degree of maturity. However, this favorable opportunity could present itself at any time. The Nuremberg Congress had opened on September 5 and Goebbels' propaganda had maintained an intense excitement in the country which was still accused by the anxiety due to the events. The fights between Sudetes and the Czechs, the warnings launched by the French and English governments, the military precautionary measures taken by many. European states created an atmosphere of war that it became all the more difficult to dispute as the Germans could still listen to foreign radios.

Hitler, Goering, Goebbels had made statements intended to reassure the Germans from an economic point of view. But on September 12, in a vehement speech before the closing of the congress, Hitler clarified his demands based on the Sudeten's right to self-determination. He declared that he could not bear any longer than six million Czechs bullying three million Germans, than if the Sudetes asked for the support of Germany, the latter would bring them help. Encouraged by this speech, the Sudetes caused violent incidents, addressed an ultimatum to the Czechoslovak government and their leader Henlein broke off negotiations with the government in Prague. The anxiety grew in Europe, spread to Germany. Hitler had ordered mobilization measures. He amplified them. Dates, when war was to break out, were spreading throughout the country. Alongside thousands of revenge, fanatic Nazis convinced of the unbeatable strength of the New Reich and the infallibility of the Fuhrer, a few others worried, notably those whose sympathy for the regime had been largely based on their faith in a Fuhrer "chancellor of peace". They now hope that the General Staff will be able to stop the war race in time.

The prefect of police, Count Helldorf, had himself considered it opportune to declare himself in favor of a coup d'état if war were to break out. His support could be invaluable. He had a high rank in the hierarchy of SA. He could provide the alibi for a coup by the General Staff. He could make conspiracy available to the General Staff.

He could make available for conspiracy all the state police troops in the capital, and these would be all the more useful as the profusion of SS posts in Berlin necessitated the intervention of large numbers. more than the military strength available to Von Witzleben.

While in Halder's apartment, on September 15, the conspirators were discussing the latest modalities of the insurrection, the radio communicated to them from time to time the most recent information on the development of the international crisis. Canaris had prepared a brief with a full account of the Nazi crimes in order to edify the German population. He was also part of a project that avoided his personal intervention. He would seek an audience with the Fuhrer for himself and one of his deputies, Captain Liedig. But under the pretext of sudden discomfort, he would let his deputy go alone to the Chancellery, discreetly accompanied by a few officers. Captain Liedig would ask the Fuhrer for permission to present two of these to him as having rendered exceptional services to the Reich. Hitler would get up as usual to shake their hands and the officers would take the opportunity to immobilize him. From the anteroom other officers would come to the rescue to paralyze the possible resistance of the personnel of the Chancellery or of the special guards.

Hitler would be taken out of the building through a back door and immediately taken in an automobile to a nursing home in the suburbs of Berlin, the director of which was part of the plot. A well-known psychiatrist, Kurt Borhoefferil, was ready to certify that Hitler was mad. Meanwhile the commander of the Berlin garrison, Von Witzleben, would occupy important points of the capital. An armored division had been moved to Thuringia, in order to possibly cut off the way for Leibstandart's troops if they, who were stationed in Baviere, tried to march on Berlin to defend the Fuhrer. The certificate of madness would be enough to silence the scruples of the military. Besides, Nazism would not be brutally eliminated. Hitler would be offered to Goering. Himmler and Rudolf Hess would, however, be immediately arrested.

Goering would subsequently be eliminated. This plan gave rise to many objections. The concrete realities of its execution seemed fraught with difficulties. General von Witzleben had more simply planned to have the garrison of the capital take up arms the next day and to have the Fuhrer arrested as soon as he returned from Nuremberg to Berlin. Once a regular power was established, the army would give legal orders to all SS leaders to surrender to the nearest military office to submit to it. It was expected that the vast majority of the SS would comply. We had just discussed the text of the proclamation that would be issued to the German people, while no precise agreement had yet been reached on the process of action to be attempted, when the radio announced extraordinary news: Neville Chamberlain had requested a interview with the Fuhrer. The latter had accepted and already the British Premier was flying to Berchtesgaden.

All the plans collapsed. On the one hand Hitler would not return to Berlin the next day and would go to Berchtesgaden, on the other hand the English took him very

seriously. Moreover, how can we say that the Fuhrer was embarking on an aggressive policy with his eyes closed, since he agreed to negotiate? The conspirators looked at each other in consternation. Schacht was in his apartment when he heard the same information: "Do you imagine," he cried, "a president of the Council of Ministers of the British Empire visiting this gangster?" This gangster that Schacht had also helped to rise to power and that he continued to serve.

However, in Halder's apartment, one of the conspirators expressed the opinion that it was not all played out. Perhaps the English were counting on Hitler's refusal to make concessions after his Nuremberg speech, and Chamberlain's spectacular trip would have no other object than to make the Fuhrer's wrongs more glaring, and to extend the pole to the German affixers in this way? But the facts soon seemed to prove otherwise. Hitler was indeed intransigent, and Chamberlain was ready to make concessions. But weren't they part of the English maneuver? If Hitler gave in on the rest they would be satisfied, because the situation of the Fuhrer would be weakened. If Hitler remained intractable, it was to give the opposition new arguments and increase its chances. For a few days events seemed to confirm this hypothesis.

Lord Runciman's mediation effort had failed, the Czech government dissolved the Sudeten party, opened up an information against Henlein for endangering state security. Henlein replied by announcing the creation of Sudeten legions in Germany and Czechoslovakia. Dadaïer was going to London, Mussolini declared that in a conflict for or against Prague Italy would be alongside Germany. Not only was the threat of war not ruled out, but the threatening war looked set to become widespread. Then it was announced that the French and English ministers had drafted in London a new plan which made new concessions to the Reich at the expense of Czechoslovakia. The democracies freed and strengthened the position of the Fuhrer.

But now Chamberlain returns to Germany, to Godesberg. He is on one side of the Rhine, Hitler on the other and there is talk of a rupture. The motives to act for the conspirators will be reborn. Then a provisional agreement was established in Godesberg. But the Czechs push it back, decree the general mobilization of men under forty. General Gamelin will confer with his English colleague. The peoples of Europe are in anguish. The chanceries are feverish. The German people believe more every day that war is imminent. Hitler wants to provoke renewed enthusiasm. He ordered a military parade through Berlin for September 27, but the hoped-for enthusiasm did not manifest itself. Hitler shows himself on the balcony. He is not cheered as usual and he withdraws. Are there not for the conspirators all the elements of the expected situation: imminent danger of war, disappointment of part of the population? Hitler has set a date for his speech: September 30.

There are only two more days. Halder had assured that at least three days before the possible outbreak of hostilities, he would know whether Hitler's threats were a bluff or not, that at least twenty-four hours in advance he would know whether the order should be given. alarmed to cross the Czech border. He will wait until these deadlines

have elapsed to make a decision. It is therefore in the extreme limit that the conspirators are now postponing the moment of action.

On the 28th, Witzleben begs Halder to come and ask Brauchitsch if he is ready to walk with them. Halder goes to the Commander-in-Chief and comes back saying that Brauchitsch is unworthy of the war blackmail by the Fuhrer, but that he will not intervene himself. He will let it happen. Halder, however, has the impression that Brauchitsch will work if the case is set in motion. From Oster's office, Witzleben then telephones Brauchitsch to tell him everything is ready. He asks Him to give the necessary orders. But Brauchitsch evades this plea and looks for an alibi. He still wants to find out, go himself to the Chancellery to see where we are.

However, Oster continues to receive and transmit the news. These become contradictory. The government of London intervened in Rome with the approval of the French government. Mussolini called Berlin. And finally, it is the announcement of the Munich conference and the diplomatic victory of the Fuhrer. Hitler had satisfaction and he had no war. His intuition had won. His prestige rose sharply.

What if Neville Chamberlain hadn't flown to Berchtesgaden? Had Hitler been swept away?

Had the economy of a new world war been made?

Nothing is less sure. It would be singularly overestimating the means and the will to succeed of these "opponents" to want to affirm it. In the days immediately preceding the Munich agreement, were not the circumstances exactly those which the conspiracies described as the most favorable to action? But these generals, these officers, these bourgeois, weren't they just waiting for the opportunity to hide? Wasn't that the only cause of their nervousness? And the preparation of the plot was notoriously insufficient. Who could tell how the army would have followed? What was the Nazi reaction and what had the province done?

Durante el ataque del 20 de julio de 1944, llevado a cabo en condiciones psicológicas mucho más favorables, los preparativos meticulosos fueron aún insuficientes. Los generales alemanes y el propio Führer declararon que si las democracias no se hubieran rendido ante Múnich, Hitler estaba decidido a hacer las concesiones él mismo, ya que habría retirado sus tropas de Renania el 7 de marzo de 1936, si hubiera un regimiento francés al frente de un puente sobre el Rin. Este fue un acto efectivo de oposición al régimen de Hitler. No lo supimos hasta más tarde. Pero también sabíamos que en la mente del Führer, el acuerdo de Munich no era un final, sino un paso y que, si no se hubiera firmado el acuerdo, esto no habría cambiado sus ambiciones finales. Solo habría esperado más antes de poner en marcha sus ejércitos, con el mayor consentimiento de su Estado Mayor y su gente.

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MAXIME MOURIN

LES COMLOTS CONTRE HITLER

(1938-1945)



PAYOT, PARIS